

Energy Central-Printer Friendly

## **Pennsylvania Conservation Official Defends Plan for Gas Drilling in Forests**

By Amy Worden, The Philadelphia Inquirer -- June 5

The state's top conservation official yesterday defended a controversial plan to sell gas drilling rights in state forests, as lawmakers pressed for a public hearing to determine the environmental consequences of such drilling.

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources came under fire last month after the agency's plan to auction rights to drill dozens of gas wells on 500,000 acres was made public. Most of the acreage is in the north-central section of the state.

"We feel confident that we've been doing this for 55 years, and we can do it right," John Oliver, secretary of the agency, said yesterday after addressing the House subcommittee on parks and forests.

Oliver said that, regardless of delays, he had every intention to proceed with the auction, which would be the largest of its kind in state history.

"No one has made the case that we shouldn't go ahead," he said. At stake is a potential "world class" natural-gas reserve worth billions of dollars that flows under the state through a deep geological formation known as the Trenton-Black River, geologists said.

The formation runs thousands of feet below the Appalachian mountain range stretching from New York to Tennessee. It has been explored only recently because of the cost involved in deep mining.

The leases could net the state \$10 million in rent over three years, compared with the roughly \$1.5 million it receives from existing gas wells.

Royalties from gas sales could generate up to \$1.7 million a year per well, all of which would be directed to a special fund that supports conservation projects.

The agency postponed the auction, which had been scheduled for May 8 and 9, after its advisory council recommended that the sale be delayed to allow public comment.

In response, the agency organized six public information sessions at various locations before setting a June 15 deadline for comment.

But environmentalists and some lawmakers said that was not good enough.

"The process when you have a proposal of this nature with a tremendous amount of dollars and a tremendous amount of research is to have a public hearing out front," said Rep. Robert Freeman, (D., Northampton) who made the motion for a full hearing before the House Environmental Resources and Energy Committee.

Rep. Art Hershey (R., Chester), committee chairman, said he would consult with House Republican leaders before deciding whether to hold a hearing on the matter.

"I don't see a big benefit" to the hearing, Hershey said. "I don't think [the agency] is hiding anything."

Oliver said he was surprised at the public outcry over the auction, because the state had been selling leasing rights on public land since 1947. But critics accused the agency of trying to steamroll through a project that could threaten the environment in one of the last remaining large swaths of forest in the East.

Some criticized the agency for not preparing an extensive environmental-impact statement, such as those prepared by PennDot before proceeding with a highway project. Under state law, the department is not required to hold public hearings or prepare an environmental-impact statement.

Mine exploration would require explosives and loud machinery, Rep.

Sara Steelman (D., Indiana) said. "How do we know the effect that continuing noise and vibration will have on recreation and wildlife?" she asked.

The agency said its own environmental review procedure was adequate.

"We think we put stringent safeguards in our system," said Daniel Devlin, the agency's chief of forest resource planning. He said drilling would be prohibited in state parks and wild areas, and the number of wells would be limited to one per 640 acres.

"The purpose of an environmental-impact statement is to evaluate the impacts in advance of a decision," said Jeff Schmidt, governmental liaison for the Sierra Club's Pennsylvania chapter.

"Their environmental review is done after the decision to move forward has been made."

Oliver said if a hearing were scheduled, he would lift the June 15 deadline for public comment.

But Schmidt and other environmental leaders said excluding the public from decisions involving the stewardship of public land was wrong.

"There is a certain arrogance on the part of some state officials," he said. "They say: 'We know what's right, and the public should accept that.' "

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